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The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

TED STRONG IN MONTANA

OR

Trouble at Blackfoot Agency

BY

NED TAYLOR

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TED STRONG IN MONTANA;

OR,

Trouble at the Blackfoot Agency.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

"Fer it's home, boys, home, don't let yer courage fail
We're shore gettin' close ter the end of ther trail.
We'll bed the cattle down by the moonlight pale,
And we'll sleep in our bunks till the morning."

CHORUS.

"Ip-e-lago, go on little doggie,
You'll be a beef steer by and by."

It was Bud Morgan who sang the verse of the old trail song as he rode in the rear of the herd, while all the other boys joined in the chorus. The Black Mountain herd of a thousand head, with Ted Strong and five of his young rough riders in charge, was nearing the end of its journey.

All across Montana the herd had trailed, skirting the base of the Big Snowy Mountains and running up some of the gentle slopes that lead to the foothills of the Rockies. With the exception of one adventure with a band of cattle rustlers, the journey had been an uneventful and successful one. In the only exciting incident that had occurred, Ted Strong and his rough riders had come out on the top of the heap, and Roaring Bill Reynolds, who had led the party of cattle rustlers in their attack on the Black Mountain herd, had found the boys in charge of the herd more than his match. Instead of taking the young rough riders by surprise he had been surprised himself, and had run his head into a noose from which he found it im-

possible to withdraw. Only for the daring act of Ted Strong, whom he had tried to kill more than once, he would have been lynched by a gang of angry cowboys, and now he was awaiting punishment for his crimes, securely locked up in the State's prison at Bismarck.*

It was a beautiful sunny afternoon, and the slow-moving herd was now trailing down the side of a long slope, in full sight of the scattered tepees and neat military buildings of the Blackfoot reservation, the end of its long journey.

The boys were naturally jubilant at the successful completion of their undertaking, and joined in the chorus of the song bellowed by Bud Morgan to the best of their abilities. It is no small task to take a herd of cattle over so long a journey, and Ted Strong might have been pardoned if he felt rather proud of the performance of his rough riders.

He was riding in the lead of the herd setting the pace for them, while Thaddeus Perkins, mounted on the seat of the grub wagon, was urging his mules along a little distance ahead.

Beanpole had noted with some anxiety, during the past few days, that the chuck wagon was growing lighter and lighter, and that provisions were running pretty low. To Beanpole's mind, this was about the worst calamity that could befall, for the tall, slender youth had the appetite of an ostrich and believed in satisfying it with the greatest regularity.

Now, when at last he had come in sight of the reservation, where he knew that plenty more eatables were to be had, he drove ahead as fast as the mules would run. The rough riders intended to spend that night in the fort, and so there was no need for the chuck wagon to remain behind to pitch camp and cook supper.

Ted was watching Beanpole's rough progress over the hummocky surface of the prairie with an amused smile on his face when he noticed that the chuck wagon had come to a sudden standstill. A moment later he saw what it was that had caused Beanpole to pull up so suddenly, for a party on horseback was approaching.

The party was a considerable distance off, and at first Ted could not distinguish their forms very well. As they came nearer, however, he saw that several figures in the blue and yellow of the U. S. Cavalry were in advance, and that two or three ladies were in the rear.

"Hello, Jack!" he yelled. "Look here. Here's two or three ladies come out to welcome us to the Blackfoot reservation. Beanpole is talking to them already. Spruce up a bit and look your prettiest."

Jack dashed to the front of the herd and looked, too.

"Weally now," muttered Jack, "I wathah think that you are wight. Ladies, bah Jove, and look at me. Just look at me!"

"You're all right, Jack," said Ted. "I think that you are just about the prettiest thing I have seen in a long time."

But Jack Slate did not agree with him.

"Pwettiest thing you have seen in a long time," he cried. "I'm a sight. Why didn't I think to put on something decent this morning. It's enough to make one cwy."

"Never mind, Jack," said Kit Summers. "Don't worry. I don't believe the girls care how you are dressed. They'll never think of looking at you. You know girls never pay any attention to you when Ted, and Bud, and myself are around. And Beanpole's stolen a march on us. I dare say he has them all captivated by this time. Don't worry. The girls won't notice how you are dressed."

For a moment Jack Slate was speechless with indignation.

"Of all the conceited wemahks I ever heard," he burst out, "that's about the wankest. Won't notice me, eh? Well, they needn't notice me. I guess they're just some half-bweeds, anyway. From what I've heard the girls up in this section are not vewy pwetty."

"Judging from what I can see of them," said Ted, "those girls ahead there are all right. They're mighty graceful, anyway, and they ride well. We'll have a

*Full particulars of this affair, in which Ted Strong succeeded in capturing one of the most notorious cattle thieves the West has ever produced, will be found in the story entitled "Ted Strong on the Trail; or, The Cattle Men of Salt Licks," which is printed in No. 6 of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

chance to look at their faces when we get a little nearer, but one of them has blond hair. I can see it from here."

"Wats!" sneered Jack. "They look all wight about half a mile away. Wait till we get neawer. You'll see that they are pawaiwie girls, all sunburned and howwible looking."

"I've met some prairie girls before," said Kit. "They were a little sunburned, some of them, but they weren't horrible looking by a long shot. At least, that's my opinion, and, so far as I could judge from your actions, you found some of the girls back at Crook City pretty good company."

"Oh, pwetty good," said Jack.

He was busy arranging the handkerchief around his neck, and so did not pay much attention to what Kit was saying. Then he drew a small pocket-mirror and a comb from his breast pocket, and, hanging his sombrero on his saddle horn, proceeded to comb his hair as well as he could on the back of a prancing cow pony.

"Let me lend ye a hand, there," called Bud Morgan, who had ridden up on the side of the herd, leaving Pomp in the rear. "I'll comb yer hair for ye so yer mother wouldn't know ye fer her son ef she met ye in the dark an' couldn't see ye. I useter work in a barber shop down at Abilene. At least, I worked thar fer a day, till I cut a man's throat with a razor an' was near lynched fer it. I can give ye the very latest thing in a hair cut or a hair comb.

"I'll give ther proper cowboy twist to yer forelock."

"I wathah think that you won't touch my hair," fumed Jack. "I don't want any cowboy twists in my hair. I look bad enough as it is, without your making me out a fweak. If you're such a good barber, why don't you cut your own hair. It's long enough, goodness knows."

Bud brushed his long flaxen strands back from his brows as he rode nearer.

"A man what's much among Injuns oughter leave his hair long," said he. "A redskin thinks a lot more of ye ef ye have long hair."

"Why?" asked Kit.

"They think that when a man cuts his hair short it's because he's afraid of bein' scalped. Short hair doesn't give a good grip fer a redskin to scalp ye by. They think that the white men with short hair have it cut just to make the likelihood of bein' scalped the less likely. They cain't see any other reason fer a man cuttin' his hair when nature made it to grow long. So when a man lets it grow like mine, they think, in course, that he's a brave man an' a big chief who isn't afraid of Injuns, and who just invites them by his long hair to come and try scalpin' him an' see what they'll get. Consekently they lets him alone, thinkin' that he's a mighty big warrior—hot stuff. A bluff allers goes with a red. They never call it. Ef ye have the nerve ye kin keep on raisin' them an' raisin' them, an' they'll never pluck up the spunk ter call ye. But a man what cuts his hair short—he's a coward an' afraid of ther scalpin' knife. He bears ther advertisement of that fact about with him on his close-cropped head. Consekently they despises him as such, an' they're ready ter tackle him any day in the week."

"I suppose that's the reason why Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill and all those fellows wear their hair long," said Kit.

"That's it," said Bud. "Some Eastern folks thinks it's just vanity an' freakishness, but it ain't nothing of ther sort. They found in their dealin's with the savages that it paid, an' thet's why they wear it thet way."

"Tell the story about cutting the man's thwoat with a wazor," said Jack, who had almost completed his toilet.

"Thar's no story to et," said Bud. "Ther razor jest slipped an' cut him. He thort I did it a-purpose, an' as he was a prominent citizen I come near bein' lynched. I finally convinced the folks thet it was an accident, an' they let me go with a solemn warnin' never to try my hand at barberin' no more. They said I was altogether too barbarous ter be a barber. But did I ever tell ye the story of ther three eggs?"

"No," said Jack, eagerly. "Tell it now."

"Two bad—too bad," said Bud. Everybody laughed at this old joke but Jack. He didn't see the point.

"Go on with the story," he said.

"I jest told it," said Bud. "Two bad. Don't yer see. Two of them was bad."

There was another roar of laughter from Ted and Kit, and even Pomp showed his teeth in a broad grin. Jack looked properly disgusted, and rode ahead with Ted to meet the newcomers.

They were only a short distance away now and approaching rapidly.

"There's Lieut. Ransom in front," said Ted. "He's the fellow who bargained for the steers. He promised us a good time when we arrived here. That other man wears a colonel's uniform. I presume he's in command of the post."

"Those ladies wide well, I must say," said Jack. "I wondah who they are?"

"They look mighty familiar to me. They look like—— But the girls can't be here; we left them back at Crook City."

"They look like Louise Rossiter and Kate Lamont," said Jack, a flush rising to his cheeks. "But it isn't them, of course. We left them away back in Crook City."

The girls rode a little nearer, and one of them—the blond one—waved her hand.

"By Jove!" said Ted. "Look at that! Isn't that like Louise? It's her living image!"

"Hello, lieutenant!" he called out, as Lieut. Ransom, who was in advance, came within earshot. Then he turned:

"By Jove, Jack! It's the girls! How did they get here? Look at them? They're waving to us."

CHAPTER II.

A WELCOME TO THE BLACKFOOT RESERVATION.

A moment later there was a perfect babel of talking and laughter as the boys shook hands with Lieut. Ransom and with the girls, the blond one and the dark one, blushing and pretty after their ride across the prairie, and evidently delighted with the surprise they had sprung upon the boys.

"This is Lieut. Ransom; but you know him already, I see," said Louise, introducing Ted and Kit. "Well, this is Col. Martin, and this is Mrs. Capt. Lester, Kate's aunt, with whom we are visiting at the reservation."

Ted and Kit bowed to the distinguished-looking colonel and to the lady introduced as Kate's aunt.

"I've heard of you boys before the girls came here," said Col. Martin; "Lieut. Ransom told me something of you. But since the girls came we have been listening to your praises from morning to night."

"All the officers at the fort are dreadfully jealous of you," said Mrs. Lester. "They've been paying the girls all sorts of attention, but they talk about you boys all the time."

Jack Slate straightened up at once and looked happy.

"I'm suah it was so kind of the girls to talk about me," he said. "I wathah think that I won't come up to your expectations of me."

"Oh! never mind that," said Kate. "We haven't spoken of you so much. It's Ted and Kit and Bud Morgan we've been talkiing about."

"Yer sarvint, miss," said Bud, making a sweeping bow and waving his sombrero while Jack fell back crestfallen. Jack's vanity was a good deal in evidence at times, and mischievous Kate took pleasure in rubbing him the wrong way on all possible occasions.

"That's awfully good of you," said Ted. "But it doesn't explain how you happen to be here. We left you behind at Crook City. We come here and find you ahead of us."

"Railroads move a good deal quicker than those poky old cattle," said Kate. "We're fond of ranch life and all that, but we're not so fond as to come all this distance in a big grocery wagon behind a herd of cows the way Thaddeus did."

There was a general laugh at the expense of Beanpole, who had already made the acquaintance of everyone in the party, and who was posing beside his mule team, showing off his long, slender figure to the best possible advantage.

"This is Capt. Lester," continued Kate, "and the rest of the men back there are a detachment of cavalry to take charge of your herd from this on."

"Yes," said Lieut. Ransom, "you've done us a big

favor in getting the beef here as quickly as you did. The Indians will have enough to eat now, and that's the only thing that will keep them from getting fractious and talking about dancing the scalp and mixing the war medicine. My men will take charge of the cows from now on, and you fellows must come with us and let us entertain you for a few days. We have quarters in one of the empty houses in officer's row all ready for you."

"I'm sure we're grateful," said Ted. "And I can't say that we're so sorry to bid good-by to these cows. We've taken care of them over a good many miles of country."

"Come on, boys," cried the lieutenant, waving his hand to the sergeant in charge of the detachment of bluecoats. "Get up here and drive these cows in. Make a count of them and see if it tallies with the seller's. Are you willing to trust to our count without checking, Mr. Strong?"

"Perfectly," said Ted. "If I'm not mistaken you'll find a thousand and four head of cattle there."

"Put a man on that chuck wagon, sergeant, and tell him to drive it up to the fort," called Ransom. "Now, gentlemen, if you'll mount your horses again we'll be back in time for dinner."

Ted waited a few moments while he saw the boys in blue ride up and take charge of the herd. They showed by the workman-like way they went to business that they were well used to handling Texas steers. And, indeed, they were. Many of them had been cowboys before going into the army, and all of them had done a good deal of herding incidental to their ordinary duties at the Blackfoot agency.

There were ten in the detachment, and they got the herd moving down toward the fort in short order. One bronzed cavalryman leaped to the seat of the chuck wagon and took the reins from the hands of Beanpole, who had sat too long on the hard, wooden driver's seat not to be delighted to resign his post. Another took the *remuda* out of Pomp's hands, and then Pomp and Thaddeus mounted fresh horses themselves.

"Come on now," said Ransom. "We're off for dinner. That herd moves a little too slow for us."

He started off at a good stiff canter and the others followed his example. The boys had been moving at a slow, monotonous pace for so long that it was positive bliss to dash ahead on a good horse without having to pay any attention to a snaillike herd dragging along in the rear.

Louise and Kate were well mounted, and with Ted and Kit soon rode a little ahead of the others. Jack Slate, still worrying about how he looked, kept pace with Capt. Lester and his wife, who proved to be a charming woman on closer acquaintance.

"I've got some explaining to do," said Kit, as he cantered along by the side of Kate Lamont. "I'm sorry for the way I treated you the night before we left Black Mountain."

"I'm sorry, too," said Kate. "I thought you were angry with me. But I had done nothing to offend you."

"I know that," said Kit, in a shame-faced manner. "I guess I was jealous, that's all. I saw you talking a good deal to Ted Strong. I thought you were just making fun of me."

"Kit!" The girl said this in such a reproachful tone that Kit resolved never to distrust her for a single moment from that on.

"I know I was wrong," he continued. "Ted and I talked about it afterwards. Ted made me heartily ashamed of myself and I resolved to change. I think Ted has made a different boy of me. He saved my life from a band of hostile Indians, you know."*

"I didn't know that," said Kate. "But I can see from the expression of your face that you have changed in some way. And I'm glad, Kit."

"Then you forgive me?"

Kate did not answer, but when she looked at him the boy saw that there was no need to ask that question.

At this moment Ted and Louise cantered past them with a burst of merry laughter, and there was a race for a few moments. But Louise was better mounted

*See story entitled "Ted Strong's Ride for Life; or, Caught in the Circle," in No. 5 of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

than her friend, Kate Lamont, and Kit elected to remain behind with her while Louise and Ted rode ahead toward the gates of the fort.

"This is splendid," said Louise, brushing back the fair hair that had blown across her face. "Isn't it?"

"Yes," said Ted. "But I haven't got over my surprise at finding you here yet. I had no idea that I would see you again till I got back to Black Mountain."

"And you thought that we were going to stay behind there and be dull while you fellows were down here enjoying yourselves?"

"I didn't know it would be dull."

"It was after you went away."

Ted looked at her.

"You see I missed Jack Slate so much, and Thaddeus was such a loss!"

"I see," said Ted. "But when did you decide to come?"

"A few days after you left we received the invitation from Mrs. Lester. We knew she was there, but we didn't tell you anything about it before you left. We thought we would come ahead and surprise you."

"Then you've been here two or three days."

"Almost a week. We've had a splendid time. The officers here are just grand! They get up dances and everything like that for us."

"A great deal pleasanter than the dances we used to have at Black Mountain?"

"Oh! a great deal pleasanter, much more fun and gayety."

Ted said nothing, and then Louise leaned towards him impulsively.

"No, Ted, they weren't half so nice, not half so nice as the dances you boys gave in the ranch house."

Ted reached out his hand for the hand of Louise, but the girl guided her horse off a little to one side.

"There's a whole crowd coming after us," she said, "and they're all looking at us. You must be more formal."

"I don't believe they're looking," said Ted.

"Oh! yes, they are."

"I don't care if they are."

"But I do."

They rode on for a little in silence.

"It was a great surprise for me, I can tell you," said Ted. "I recognized your figures away off, but I thought it must be somebody bearing a strong resemblance to you. Then when you waved your hand I was sure it was you. And yet it didn't seem possible. I nearly fell out of my saddle."

"I'm glad it surprised you," said Louise, keeping her eyes fixed on her gauntleted hands. "We thought it might surprise you. We thought you might like it. I thought that it might be a pleasant surprise for you. Was it?"

"Yes, very pleasant," said Ted, but his eyes said it a great deal better than his lips did.

"We were just going to stay a week, but you didn't come as soon as we expected. We were worried about you, for we heard that the Indians were out on the warpath. But Lieut. Ransom said that there was no cause for worry. He said that you could take care of yourself as well as anyone he knew. Then you were a day or so late, and we thought surely something had happened to you. We were dreadfully worried, but this morning one of the scouts came into the fort and said that he had sighted the herd coming down the valley. We just got up and cheered then."

"And then you decided to ride out and meet us?" said Ted. "That was very kind of you."

"I only did it because I wanted to," said Louise. "So it was only in kindness to myself. You needn't thank me for it. But did you meet any Indians? What kept you?"

"We were held up a little at Salt Licks," said Ted. "We had to remain there until we received orders from the government that the trail was clear and that it was safe to go ahead. That's what kept us."

"Then you didn't meet any horrible Indians or cattle rustlers or things of that sort?"

"I met a few redskins," said Ted. "But they didn't get near the herd. We managed to get clear of them. Then, as for the cattle rustlers, there were a few fellows who tried to hold us up, but we had some rangers posted for them, and they got into a trap. Roaring Bill, whom you know, is in jail now."

Later on, Louise heard from Kit of the daring and heroism shown by Ted in his fight with the Indians and rustlers, and she thought all the more of him for his modesty in not telling her about it.

"I've got another surprise for you," she said, at length, with a solemn face. "It may not be such a pleasant one. I didn't tell you at first, so that you might enjoy the first surprise, that is, if you did enjoy it."

"If I did!" said Ted. "But what's the other surprise?"

"My cousin, Earl Rossiter, arrived here yesterday. He's staying with a friend of his, the son of an officer."

"Earl Rossiter!"

It was, indeed, a surprise. Earl was Ted's bitterest foe, and it augured trouble at the fort for both to be there at the same time.

CHAPTER III.

AN EVENING DANCE.

The assembly was sounding at the reservation when the party escorting Ted Strong and his young rough riders rode in at the gates of the fort. They pulled their horses to a standstill to watch the blue-coated soldiers run out on the parade grounds and fall in line. Then they saw the officer of the day step out in front and inspect the men while they stood at "parade rest." When the officer had finished with the roll call and the orders for the day, the signal was given for the buglers and the tones of the "retreat," the regular evening call for assembly, at every fort, rang out on the still air.

When its last notes had ceased to re-echo across the silent parade grounds, the Stars and Stripes fluttered down from the flagpole and the full regimental band broke into the stirring strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

This is a scene which occurs every evening in every military station in America, Porto Rico or the Philippines. Yet no matter how often one has seen it, it never loses its interest or charm, and no true American can listen to those strains with the motionless columns of blue-clad soldiery before his eyes without some feeling of patriotic thrill and exaltation in his bosom.

As the flag dropped down the halyards, Ted's hat came from his head. The others in his party followed his example and all sat bareheaded in their saddles, in the rays of the evening sun, until the last strains of the national anthem had ceased to sound.

It was Kate Lamont who first broke the impressive silence that followed.

"I'm getting hungry and so are the boys," she said. "It's time for dinner."

And then there was a dismounting and unsaddling as the steeds were led away by orderlies, and as the rough riders were conducted to their quarters in the fort.

They found, when they reached the house which had been set open for their accommodation, that Col. Martin evidently had planned for their reception in advance. A room had been prepared for each one of the party in the empty house, even Pomp being assigned a small attic chamber; and their clothes and personal belongings had been unpacked from the grub wagon and laid out in the rooms to await their owners.

"I tell you," said Kit Summers, "this looks good. After a fellow has been sleeping on the prairie for the last 'steen nights and hasn't had anything bigger to wash in than a small hand basin, he appreciates the comforts of home. The nicest thing I know about this house is that there's a shower bath in it."

And the shower bath was used well that evening. The boys had learned that their arrival was to be celebrated by a dance, and they did their best to make themselves look presentable.

And then the luxury of a fine cold shower bath after so many days and nights on the hot, dusty prairie with little water to spare for personal cleanliness!

Ted plunged beneath the stinging, cold spray, dusty and tired. He came out from it all aglow with life and energy, and feeling as though he were ready for anything.

The dance that evening was held in the big drill hall used for some of the infantry squads to drill in in rainy weather. It was decorated with American flags and prairie flowers and grasses, and when the boys ar-

rived there, after dinner, the evening's frolic had already been started with the opening march.

By that time they had met a good many of the officers in the fort as well as some of the wives and daughters of the men stationed there. There was no dearth of partners for any of the boys, for all the girls had heard a good deal of them before their arrival, and were anxious to have the honor of dancing with these young heroes, as they regarded them.

Jack Slate was in his glory, dressed in his evening clothes, and enjoying himself more thoroughly than he had in a long time, for he found plenty of girls at the dance who would listen to all that he had to say with due respect and without poking fun at him, as was the wont of Kate Lamont.

Pomp was not present at the dance, but Bud Morgan was. He had been anxious to wear a suit of clothes he had purchased from a stage Irishman a short time before, but Ted dissuaded him from this idea, so Bud appeared in the best cowboy rig his wardrobe afforded, his long, flaxen hair fluttering behind him as he danced, and his keen, blue eyes sparkling with pleasure and excitement.

Many a woman in the gathering cast more than a passing glance at his wonderful hair and wished it her own, and altogether Bud Morgan attracted a great deal more admiration from the ladies than he had any idea of.

Kit Summers, of course, had the pick of the dances on Kate's card, and Ted danced more than once with Louise.

Ted was rather anxious, however. He knew that Earl Rossiter, who had fought him so bitterly, was in the fort, and more than likely to appear at the dance.

When he had parted with Earl he had just saved the boy's life, but Rossiter had said little or nothing about it.

Earl Rossiter had been too bitter a foe of Ted's to make friends with him all at once, and the companions he associated with were people who had urged him to continue his fight against the young rough rider. He knew that his father, who was a lawyer, had been defeated by Ted in his attempt to gain possession of the Black Mountain Ranch, and that his father had lost a great deal of money through the dispute. He himself had been humiliated more than once in his fight against Ted, and although Ted had been the means of saving his life, the young rough rider was afraid that there would be trouble when they met again.

He had not the slightest fear of Earl on his own account, but he did not wish to take part in any quarrel before ladies. He knew Earl's proud, unforgiving temper, and he was afraid that it might break out at any moment.

He forgot all about this, however, in the enjoyment of his first dance with Louise Rossiter. Then he danced with two other girls and returned to Louise to claim her for the fourth dance on his program.

He found Louise engaged in conversation with Earl Rossiter. Earl glanced up at him as he approached and flushed darkly.

"Hello, Earl!" said Ted, in his frank, open way. "How have you been lately?"

Earl stared at him for a moment, the flush rising in his cheeks. He was thinking of the defeat that he and his father had been forced to submit to at the hands of this smiling, handsome, clear-eyed young fellow.

The knowledge that he and his father had been in the wrong, and that Ted had once saved him from death by drowning, did not make him feel any more comfortable. If he had been guided solely by his passion he would have been the out-and-out, declared enemy of the rough rider, but he felt that he was under a debt to Ted, and he restrained himself.

The admiring glance thrown upon the young rancher by his pretty cousin, Louise, made him burn all over. He bowed stiffly.

"I'm very well," he said. "I see that you are looking well. I hear that you had a successful trip with your herd of cattle."

"We had pretty good luck," said Ted, in his friendliest tones. He was anxious on account of Louise to make friends with her cousin, if possible, and at present it looked as though Earl had made up his mind to bury the past.

What occurred a moment later, however, upset all his calculations.

Earl turned abruptly to Louise.

"May I have this dance?" he said. "It's a waltz."

"I'm sorry, Earl, but it's engaged already."

"You didn't object to waltzing with me long ago," said Earl. "You used to say that you thought me a good dancer."

"I think you a good dancer yet," said Louise. "And I should enjoy dancing with you very much. But this dance is engaged. I'll put you down for one of the 'extras' if you wish."

Earl's dark face flushed to a still deeper red.

"I am engaged for all the others myself," he said.

This was not true, but Earl scarcely knew what he was saying.

"I'm sorry, but I have this dance engaged."

"Then you don't want to dance with me. You've avoided me lately. Some one has been running me down to you."

"I do want to dance with you, but I can't this dance," said Louise, firmly. "No one has been saying anything about you to me. I wouldn't listen to it."

"Oh! of course, you wouldn't." There was an open sneer on Earl's face that showed that he did not mean what he was saying. "You refuse to dance with me."

"For this dance. But you must excuse me now."

Ted Strong interrupted at this point. He thought that he might manage to smooth matters over.

"I have this dance with Miss Rossiter," he said. "If you are particularly anxious to dance with her I will resign her to you."

Earl glanced at him in silence for a moment. He was pale instead of red now. He felt that he had placed himself in a bad position. The sneer was still evident on his face.

"Mr. Ted Strong," he said, "I have been forced to accept a favor once from you. I owe——"

"Don't say anything about that, old man," said Ted, laying his hand on the other boy's shoulder.

Earl drew himself away angrily and shook the hand off.

"I'm not going to say anything about it," he said. "It's not a pleasant subject with me. I was just going to say that you were welcome to your dance with Miss Rossiter. I am sure she would enjoy dancing with you much more than she would with me."

"What makes you say things like that?" said Louise.

"You as good as told me so yourself."

"I didn't tell you that. I just told you that the dance was engaged."

"And I'm willing to have you take it if Miss Rossiter is. I'm sure she's willing to give it to you," said Ted.

Ted glanced at Louise as he spoke. He meant for her to dance with Earl to prevent an open breach between the two, and she understood his meaning at once. She was fearful of a quarrel between the two boys, and she sent back a grateful glance to Ted.

"Come on, Earl," she said, with a pretense of gayety. "He turns me down, you see. Won't you take pity on me and dance with me?"

But Earl had seen the exchange of looks between the two. He did not know what it meant. To him it signified nothing but some secret understanding between his cousin and the boy he hated, and it filled his soul with jealous rage.

"You've refused me this dance," he said. "I didn't come here to ask favors from Ted Strong."

"But I've just asked you to dance with me. Think of that! Isn't that a forward thing for a girl to do?"

"After you've shown me that you wouldn't dance with me," said Earl. "I don't want you to dance with me because Ted Strong tells you to."

"Oh! dear," said Louise, clasping her hands, "what can I do to please you?"

"Go ahead and dance with him," sneered Earl. "You think you can fool me and make a monkey out of me, but you can't. I don't accept any favors from Ted Strong. I wouldn't dance with you now for any amount of money."

This was a very rude way to speak to a girl, and Louise saw Ted's face grow stern and serious as he listened to the words. She was afraid that a quarrel between the two boys might break out then and there, that Ted would speak sharply to Earl and that Earl

would retort. For the moment her whole idea was to bring the interview to a standstill. She rose to her feet.

"All right," she said, "I'll dance with Ted," and the two swept off. Some passing dancer made a remark, at which they both laughed. Earl heard the laugh and thought that they were laughing at him. He gazed after them, his eyes aflame with rage.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT FOLLOWED.

Earl was so absorbed in his own thoughts, so utterly oblivious to what was going on around him, that two or three of the dancing couples jostled against him as he stood in their path, before he drew back. Then he stepped over to the wall with a muttered curse. A fellow who was standing there laid his hands on his shoulder.

Earl Rossiter turned with an angry exclamation on his lips. Then he saw who it was and checked himself.

"Oh! it's you," he said.

"Yes, it's me. You're feeling mad, aren't you?"

The fellow who spoke evidently did not expect any answer to this, for he only laughed when Earl failed to return any. He was more of a man than a boy—tall and very well built. Anyone looking at his broad shoulders, deep chest and slender waist, the muscular limbs that showed plain through the trousers of his evening suit, his long, loosely-hung arms and his sturdy bull neck would have put him down for a strong man and an athlete.

Anyone looking at the paleness of his complexion, the cruel lines about his mouth and the puffiness under his eyes would have said that he was a dissipated man. Anyone looking into his eyes, a pale, cold gray, like the color of galvanized iron, and with an uncertain nervous twitch to them, would have said that he was a man who could not be trusted.

This was Joe Kennedy, formerly a lieutenant in the army, who was staying at the fort on a visit. He and Earl Rossiter had been very chummy of late.

He laid his arm over the boy's shoulder.

"Let's go downstairs," he said. "It's a bore watching these people dance. The girls here are either old hens, all wrinkles, or young misses just out of school, who don't do anything but giggle. They're insipid. They haven't any spice in 'em. There's no amusement for a man up here. They're opening some Pommery Sec down in the supper room. Let's go down and have a bottle. It's awfully tiresome watching this bunch."

He drew his arm through Earl's, and although Earl had not drank anything in some time—not since Ted Strong had saved his life, in fact—he hesitated.

In the first place, it flattered him to be called a "man" by such a fellow as Joe Kennedy, who was a well known clubman, and reputed to have seen life of all sorts in all quarters of the globe. In the second place, the mention of the champagne sounded attractive to him. He was in a turmoil of emotion, and he thought that his brain would grow clear and his heart stop beating so madly under the effect of the wine. And then he thought how fine and cool the wine would look as it sparkled in the glass.

He was hot and feverish, his throat was dry. Joe Kennedy had the proper view of things. He ought to look down on all these girls. What a fool he was bothering himself about a schoolgirl like Louise Rossiter! He would associate with "men" like Joe Kennedy and forget all his troubles and jealousy in drinking.

He yielded and the two went down the stairway.

Neither of them spoke until they were seated at a table in a secluded corner of the room below, and the waiter had popped the cork of the champagne bottle and filled their glasses with the pale fluid.

Earl Rossiter drank and held out his glass for more.

"That tastes good!" he said. "I was hot and thirsty."

"That's right, have another drink," said Kennedy. "It's the only way to pass the time at these stupid affairs."

Kennedy failed to add that, although he was an athlete, he was a clumsy dancer, and that no girl liked him for a partner. He also failed to say that the better

class of women at the fort avoided him on account of his reputation as a fast, dissipated fellow.

He emptied his own glass with a hearty smack.

"This is the way I always spend my time at these hops," he said, and to do him justice the appearance of his face bore out the statement.

Earl did not say anything, but drained off another glass of the champagne. Already the feeling of jealousy and rage was leaving him, and he seemed cooler. But in its place came a sullen hate for Ted Strong. He scowled across the table at Joe Kennedy, as he thought of the young rough rider dancing with his cousin upstairs.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Kennedy. "You look pretty mad."

"I am mad," said Earl.

"At that fellow upstairs who went off with your cousin? Say, she's a pretty girl, your cousin."

"Never mind her," said Earl, with a blacker scowl. "It's that Ted Strong I'm thinking of."

"He's the fellow that owns the ranch out at Black Mountain?"

"He doesn't own it, my father owns it. He's got it, if that's what you mean."

"Yes, and he's buying up some land alongside of it that I want to get. I have some interests in that neighborhood. I was quite curious to see this fellow. I had heard so much of him that I thought he would be something extraordinary, but he doesn't seem to be. He has a nice face."

"Yes, a nice sissy face," growled Earl. The wine was beginning to have its effect on him, and his head leaned a little forward on his bosom.

"Do you want to get even with him?"

Earl raised his head and stared at Joe Kennedy.

"What do you ask me that for?" he said. "What business is it of yours?"

"I'll tell you later on if we come to an understanding," said Kennedy. "If you want to get even with him I might be able to help you a bit. You've told me all about the grudge you bear this fellow. If he had done to me half of what he has to you I'd never rest till I rubbed it into him good and hard some way or other. I take it that you feel about the same way."

Earl Rossiter eyed his companion for a long time in silence.

"What are you driving at?" he asked. "You must have something against the fellow yourself?"

"Oh, I have nothing in particular against him," said Kennedy, airily. "I met him out in the Philippines once, but I know he doesn't remember me. I have no particular love for the fellow, I don't mind admitting. And I have a little plan afoot that may bring me in a little money. If you want to join in it you can get square with Ted Strong without any trouble."

"I might have been willing to get square with Ted Strong a while ago. But I'm under some obligation to him. He saved my life once and I don't feel that I can fight him honorably."

"Honorably?" There was an ill-concealed sneer on Kennedy's face. "That's the talk of a kid. You ought to be a little wiser than that."

"Well——" Earl hesitated. He was very much afraid of being ridiculed and he did not like the idea of Kennedy's laughing at him.

"Now I've got a plan. You know that Ted Strong will have a few thousand after he sells those steers. I think that I might be able to use that money in my business."

"You don't think of stealing it!"

Earl looked at his companion in surprise.

"I just thought of helping myself to it. I can do it if you will assist me. The money won't be in a check; it will be in bank notes. You can bet that this Strong will ask for it that way. He'll want it in that form, because he wouldn't find it very handy cashing a check in Crook City, and he'll want the money when he gets back to pay off some of his cowboys. Ransom is a friend of his and he'll oblige him by getting the money in that form. So much the better for us. That is, if you want to go into this thing with me."

"You propose to lift the money, then?" said Earl.

"Hush! Lower your voice. Wait till these people get out of here."

Two or three of the girls and boys had come down

from the ballroom upstairs. They were drinking lemonade from the big cut-glass bowl of it which had been placed on a table near by, chattering and talking and laughing the while. Presently Ted Strong and Louise, together with Kit and Kate Lamont, came into the room. Then Jack Slate drifted in with another girl in tow, and presently Bud Morgan entered with two of the officers at the fort, who were evidently enjoying his quaint way of talking.

Everyone there seemed to be having a royal time, and Earl scowled at his pretty cousin as she drank lemonade and handed the little cup back to Ted Strong. The sight made him ready to do anything he could, to help injure Ted, no matter what it was. The fact that Ted had saved him from drowning was forgotten now. All that he thought of was getting square with Ted in some way.

Joe Kennedy watched his face and remained silent until the others had gone out of the room again. He had a pretty clear idea of what was going on in the boy's mind, for his experience in knocking about the world had given him no small ability to read character and emotion in others.

He artfully set himself to make Earl still more angry against the young rough rider.

"So that's the fellow who has cut you out with Louise Rossiter?" he said. "Have some more wine."

Earl's glass was filled again and he drained it eagerly.

"And you haven't the nerve to get square with him?" continued Kennedy.

Earl looked up at him with his lips drawn back, showing his even rows of white, strong teeth.

"I haven't the nerve, have I?" he said. "Just tell me your plan. Just tell me what it is that you have up your sleeve. See if I haven't the nerve. Just try my nerve once. I'll show you. I'll show Ted Strong before I get through with him whether or not it's safe for him to go on this way. He was sneering at me just now up in the ballroom."

"I saw it," said Kennedy. "If a man acted that way towards me I wouldn't lose much time getting even with him."

"Yes," continued Earl, in a choking voice. "He was sneering at me. He thinks I'm just to be looked down on. He doesn't even think enough of me to hate me."

"Well, here's my plan," said Kennedy, seeing now that he had worked Earl up into a fit condition to agree to any plot, no matter how infamous. "Just listen to me. To-morrow night the bunch of rough riders will be invited out to one of the officers' houses. Ted Strong won't go, because he has an appointment with the quartermaster to finish up matters and sign some papers relative to the delivery of the herd. He'll get back to the house about eight. The money will be locked up in his room in the house. That's about the only place where he is likely to keep it. I'll meet him after dark and get into an argument with him. When he gets home he'll get home a little late, and he's likely to have a broken nose or a black eye. In the meantime I have a man who will get into his house and get away with the money. The man is a deserter, or at least he's not a deserter yet, but he's planning to desert. As soon as he gets hold of the money he'll skip out. We can meet him at some town in the State and divide up with him. How does that plan strike you?"

"But what part do I play in it?" asked Earl. "I don't see where I come in."

"I'll tell you about that. I want to have an excuse for keeping Ted Strong out of his house that night. I can't hold him up. It would be dangerous. He would be sure to recognize me. There's no chance of attempting anything like that successfully in a place so well policed as this fort is. We could write him a decoy note, or one of us could get into a fight of some kind with him and challenge him to meet us to-morrow night outside the fort and settle it with our bare knuckles. It strikes me that he's a fellow who would accept just such a challenge as that."

"Yes, I guess he would," said Earl. "It strikes me as a better idea than the decoy note. But what have I to do with it?"

"I want you to introduce me to him, so that we can get into a quarrel of some kind with him. Then I'll challenge him to fight."

"But why can't I challenge him myself?" asked Earl. "I would ask nothing better than to use my knuckles on him."

"Don't do it," said Joe Kennedy. "He might get the better of you. He's a well set-up chap, if I'm any judge of a man, and he carries a little more weight than you do. Don't tackle a man too big for you, Earl; leave him to me."

"I'd be willing to back myself against him," said Earl, doggedly.

"Did you ever try a set-to with him?"

"I wrestled with him once."

"Well, what came of it?"

"He threw me," admitted Earl, in a shamefaced manner. "But I'd like to get another trial at him."

"He threw you, and he'd get the best of you again. He's in fine condition now. I can tell it by his eyes and face. And you haven't been getting very much exercise lately."

"But how about yourself?"

Joe Kennedy doubled up his arm. The great round muscle of his biceps shone clear through the tight sleeve of his dress coat.

It was as hard as iron when Earl Rossiter felt it.

"Your hand," said Kennedy, and he extended his. Earl reached forth his hand, and the big hand in which he placed it began to tighten round it. He winced, then writhed in pain.

"Let go," he cried, at last. "You are stronger than I thought you were."

Kennedy released his hand with a smile.

"I used to be champion middle-weight at college," he said. "I've fought with professionals, too, and I know something about the game. I've broken a man's jaw with a blow. But there's another reason why I want to fight him myself. He wouldn't fight you, if I'm a judge, for fear of offending your cousin, Miss Rossiter. He's mighty sweet on her. You can tell that at a glance. And you can bet that she'll beg him not to fight with you, and that he'll agree. He's one of those fellows who allow themselves to be led around at the apron strings of a pretty girl. She'll get sick of him when she sees him with a few molars missing."

"I guess you're right," said Earl, struck with the force of this reasoning. "But when do you want to meet him?"

"Now," said Joe; and the two made their way upstairs bent on provoking a quarrel with Ted Strong.

CHAPTER V.

THE QUARREL.

A set of quadrilles were in progress when the two made their way back to the ballroom. Earl's mind was clear now. He felt more at his ease. He had hit upon a way of getting even with Ted Strong, and he had decided to follow. Before this decision he had been bothered by his scruples of conscience. For a time at least he had been making an effort to reform and become a better style of a fellow. The struggle had cost him a good deal. Now he had given it up and planned to get the better of Ted at all hazards; he had cast all regrets and all scruples behind him.

The pupils of his eyes were a trifle dilated from the effect of the wine he had drunk, but otherwise he appeared the same as usual. Earl was a handsome boy, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with an olive skin under which a faint red flush showed at times. At present, owing to the excitement and drink which had made his eyes more brilliant, he looked handsomer even than usual, and every girl who saw him wished for a moment that she might have him for a partner.

Louise Rossiter looked up as he approached, and the thought of how well he appeared struck her also.

Ted Strong was still by her side, and she felt a little nervous about having the two boys meet again. But Earl wore an easy smile on his face and looked as if he were perfectly happy. This reassured her.

"Where have you been all this time?" she asked, gayly. "You look as if you had been enjoying yourself splendidly. Sit down between me and Kate Lamont. I want to rest for a little."

Earl bowed to Ted and smiled at his cousin.

"You must have been having a good time, too," he said, with the greatest apparent good nature. "I

[illegible] r saw you looking so pretty in your life before. [illegible] 't you think that Louise is getting prettier every day, Mr. Strong?"

"I agree with you," said Ted. "Every time I see her she seems better looking than the time before."

"You boys say that to every girl you meet," said Louise, delighted at the fact that her cousin and Ted were getting along so well

"[illegible] but we mean it in your case," said Earl.

His manner was such a change from what it was before he had gone down to the supper room that Louise looked up at him in surprise. An hour before he had been scowling and angry, ready to burst into an ex[illegible] f wrath at any moment. Now, as Louise [illegible] it him, she thought that he had never seemed so courteous or fascinating since she had first met him.

"I have a friend of mine here, quite an old friend, whom I would like to introduce to you and to Ted Strong," said Earl. "He's very anxious to meet you both. May I?"

"Certainly," said Louise, and she graciously bowed her assent. She was so glad that Earl had overcome his fit of temper, as she thought, that she was ready to do almost anything he asked her.

Joe Kennedy, who had been standing in the background, looking off across the room, but really listening to everything that was going forward, stepped up at this moment with a bow.

Louise arose to greet him. She was going to offer him her hand, but when she looked into his eyes she instinctively put her hand behind her back, without thinking what she was doing.

There was something so cold, so cruel, so repellent in those deep-set gray eyes that an involuntary shudder ran over her frame, and that the smile left her lips. She felt that there was something dangerous about this man. She would have liked to have run away from him then and there.

"Mr. Joe Kennedy—my cousin, Miss Rossiter, Mr. Ted Strong," said Earl. "Mr. Kennedy has served in the army like Ted, but he was in the regulars instead of the volunteers."

"Pleased to meet you," faltered Louise, sinking into her seat again.

"West Point man, I suppose?" said Ted, reaching forth his hand.

Kennedy bowed to Louise and shook hands with Ted.

"Yes, I put in my time at the Point," he said. "I went to college first and then to the Point afterwards. I found army life a little too slow for me, and got out just before the Spanish-American War. I've been kicking myself ever since, for I didn't have political pull enough to get back to take part in the fun when it did come up."

"You weren't down in Cuba, then?" said Ted, absently.

He was repeating the name Kennedy over and over in his mind. The name seemed familiar to him in some way. It seemed to him that he had heard the officers of the —th Cavalry speak of a man of that name who had been forced to leave the army. He had been caught cheating at cards, and later on, suspicions pointed very strongly to prove that he had committed a cold-blooded and deliberate murder in shooting the brother officer who had caught him cheating. The suspicions were not strong enough, however, to warrant the holding of a court-martial, but the man had been shunned by all his companions from that time on, and had been forced, finally, to resign his commission. Could it be that this was the man? But a moment later Ted laughed to himself at this idea. There was more than one Kennedy in the army, and then he didn't even remember that the man he was thinking of was named Kennedy, after all.

"There go your wits wool-gathering again," said Louise; "I suppose you are thinking of your old cows now. First, you tell me how well I look, and then you begin to think of other things right away. Your mind was a thousand miles from here then."

"Maybe it was," smiled Ted. "But it wanted to get back and it's back now. But here's a new partner to claim you for the next dance."

A handsome young fellow, clad in the uniform of a

lieutenant of cavalry, came up, and Louise went off with him.

Joe Kennedy sank into the vacant chair she had left, and Earl Rossiter, who had been talking to Kate Lamont, left her and sat down on the other side of Ted.

A waltz was now in progress, and as most of the people in the room were on the floor dancing, the boys in the chairs were left to themselves.

Earl Rossiter caught a meaning look from Kennedy's eye and knew that the older fellow was just planning to get Ted Strong into an argument. He was nowhere near Kennedy's match in diplomacy or knowledge of the world, and he remained silent, allowing Kennedy to open the conversation.

Kennedy showed at once what his plan of action was to be.

"So you are a volunteer?" he said, with a half sneer. "You fellows thought you saw some real fighting at San Juan and in the Philippines, I suppose."

"Gen. Wheeler, who was there, thought that it was pretty good fighting. And Gen. Wheeler ought to know. He saw plenty of it in the Civil War."

"He was just saying that to flatter you fellows," said Kennedy. "He was laughing at you in his sleeve. You boys don't know a thing about fighting."

"Perhaps I don't," said Ted, "and perhaps a great many of the other fellows there didn't. But still there were some men there from the regular army, and some of them had been in the Civil War. I've heard them say that, for the number of men engaged, some of the battles in the Philippines were about as hot as anything they ever got into."

"It's funny to hear these tin soldiers talk," said Kennedy, laughing over at Earl Rossiter. "They make me tired."

Earl took his cue and laughed heartily.

Ted was surprised at this sort of talk, to say the least, and stared from one to the other in amazement.

He finally concluded that Kennedy had been drinking. This seemed to him the only explanation for his rudeness. He had no idea that Kennedy had anything to gain by bringing on a quarrel with him, and the contemptuous remark had come from Kennedy and not from Earl.

"Yes, all this talk about these war heroes makes me tired," continued Joe Kennedy. "It's the biggest fake I ever listened to. It's just playing at soldiering the same way as you young fellows are playing at running a ranch. I've been in the West when you were in your cradle. I tell you that you never saw a real battle."

It was on the tip of Ted's tongue to suggest that as Kennedy, although an army officer, had seen none of the fighting in the late war, he was scarcely in a position to say very much about it. But he restrained himself in time, and adopting the wisest and politest course under the circumstances, said nothing at all.

"Why, I've heard army men who were down there tell me that half the rough riders were rank cowards," continued Kennedy. "They were all frightened to death. The only reason that they didn't run away was that they were too scared to move."

Kennedy burst into another laugh and Earl Rossiter joined in it.

This last speech seemed almost too much to allow to pass unnoticed, but still Ted said nothing. A ballroom at which he was an invited guest was no place in which to engage in a quarrel, and although his cheeks flushed under the insult to his fellow soldiers, he kept his mouth tightly closed.

"Why," said Kennedy, "it was the biggest farce I ever heard of."

"Maybe that was the way you heard it," said Ted, quietly, "but I think that you must have been misinformed. Every officer in the regulars whom I have talked to has praised the conduct of the volunteer regiments under fire. I agree with you that the American regular is the finest soldier in the world, but I think also that the volunteers have some praise coming to them."

"Would you listen to that, Earl?" crowed Kennedy. "It takes a volunteer to blow his own trumpet. They're pretty brisk at sounding their own praises."

"I'm sorry if I said anything that sounded conceited," said Ted. "I'm sure I didn't intend to. I was not speaking about myself. I was speaking about

some of the regiments in Cuba and the Philippines. I have nothing to say about myself. I'm simply trying to defend my fellow soldiers. They don't deserve to be spoken of in the sneering way you use. They are not here to defend themselves."

"Mighty kind of you to take up the cudgels for them," said Kennedy. "You seem to be a pretty good boaster."

Ted leaned forward in his seat and stared at the speaker. Was he drunk? No, there was no flush in that pale, pasty face—there was not the faintest sign of excitement of any kind.

"You don't know what you are talking about or you are intoxicated," he said.

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean it. You seem to have set yourself to insult me."

"You accuse me of conduct unbecoming an officer?"

"I don't accuse you of anything."

The smile had left Kennedy's face now, and his eyes gleamed cruelly.

"You know that you have insulted me," he said. "I can't take talk like that from any man."

"Mr. Kennedy," said Ted, "I'm very sorry if I have offended you. The only thing is that I can't agree with some of the things you said."

Kennedy rose to his feet, thrust his hands in his pockets and smiled at Ted.

"So," he said, slowly, "you are perfectly willing to take back what you said. You back water. You're afraid to stand by what you said. Your courage seems to be oozing away."

Ted was really angry now. He also rose to his feet.

"See here," he said, and he leaned over towards Kennedy. so that the bully drew back suddenly, "you seem to be set on insulting me. You accuse me of cowardice. I don't want to fight with you, but if you think I'll listen to talk like that you're mistaken."

"You'll have to fight with me now or stamp yourself as a coward," said Kennedy. "You've insulted me and there's only one way to wipe that out. Meet me to-morrow night at the trench outside the palisade. I'll be there alone, and we can settle this little affair."

Ted's anger was at boiling point now.

"Don't be afraid," he said, "I'll meet you. I've got some business on hand at eight to-morrow evening, but I'll be there at half-past."

Then he strode away, heartily sorry that he had become involved in a quarrel, but resolved to punish Kennedy, nevertheless.

Kennedy called him back for a moment.

"You are sure you won't get frightened and stay away?" he said. His object was to get Ted still angrier, so that there would be no doubt of his appearance the following evening.

"Don't worry," said Ted. "I don't want to get into a fight, but since I said I would be there I'll be there."

"And bring a gang of your friends, I suppose?"

"If you agree to come alone I'll come alone."

"Oh, I'll be there alone, all right. I'm not afraid to fight ten like you. I'll teach you to talk a little more respectfully to a gentleman."

"Then I'll be there alone. I'll be perfectly willing to learn anything that you can teach me."

At this moment Louise and Kate presented themselves on the arms of their partners. The dance was over.

"What are you fellows glaring about?" asked Kate. "You look as if you were going to fight a duel."

Kennedy laughed in the most unconcerned way.

"We were simply discussing a few military points," he said. "I suppose warlike talk like that makes us look fiercely."

"I should say it did," said Kate; "but I'm hungry. If Kit doesn't show up pretty soon and take me down to supper I'll go down with some one else."

But Kit Summers did show up at that moment, and claiming Kate Lamont, led her off. Ted and Louise followed suit a few moments later, and Earl Rossiter and Joe Kennedy were left alone once more.

"How does that strike you?" said Kennedy. "Don't you think that our little plan is working out all right?"

"So far so good," said Earl. "But are you sure that you can get the best of the cursed snob?"

Kennedy drew out a pair of brass knuckles.

"If my fists don't beat him these will," he said.

CHAPTER VI.

A BLOW FROM BEHIND.

The moon was just rising and the outer palisade of the fort cast a long black shadow across the grassy slope, the glacis—as it is called in military phraseology—that stretched down from it. At one end of the slope there was a deep gully. It had once been part of the fortifications, a trench behind which riflemen could lie, and in which battery guns could be placed.

It had been the scene of more than one hotly contested fight between soldiers and scouts on the one hand and Crow and Blackfoot Indians on the other, but at present it was old and useless.

Newer fortifications had been constructed back of this trench, and big battery guns had been mounted on the walls of the fort, that could sweep anything off the plain for miles around, so that the trench was now discarded as a piece of fortification.

Its outlines were still plain, however, but the sides and bottom were carpeted with fine grass, all dewy in the moonlight, and it looked as peaceful a spot as one could find anywhere.

These thoughts were running through Ted's mind as he waited in the broad open trench. He had completed making his arrangements with the quartermaster and now his work in the Blackfoot agency had been completed. He intended to leave by train for Crook City the following day, although the rest of the boys were very loath to leave the pleasure and gayeties of the life at the fort. The money he had received for the steers he had sold to the government had been paid to him promptly. This is not usually the case in such contracts, but this time the money had been ready some time before, as the beef had been delayed in delivery. Ted had received payment in cash, owing to the kindness of Lieut. Ransom, who could not do enough for the young rough riders during their stay. It was now lying in his room, packed in a hand satchel. Ted knew it would be perfectly safe there, but still he thought that it was his place to be watching it, and he was rather impatient at the non-appearance of Kennedy.

Kennedy, on his part, was taking his time. He wanted to delay Ted all he could, and he thought that there could be no harm keeping the rough rider waiting for a while. He calculated that this wait would sap the boy's courage and make him fall an easier victim to his blows.

He was mistaken in this, however. Ted was anything but frightened at the prospect he had before him. He knew from looking at Kennedy and from the fellow's evident anxiety to bring on a quarrel that the man was something of a bruiser, but he had made up his mind that he must punish the bully and he had no thought of losing.

The idea of treachery of any kind never entered his brain. He knew that Kennedy had formerly been an officer in the army, and the thought of suspecting an officer in the U. S. Army of anything cowardly or underhanded had never entered his head. He knew, as every one else in a position to know, does, that the American regular army officer is the bravest and coolest and most honorable of men the world over.

The delay irritated him a good deal and still further inflamed his anger against Kennedy, so that it had just the opposite effect from that which it was planned to have.

When Ted had waited half an hour he saw a dark figure approaching along the grassy floor of the trench. The bottom of the trench was fully forty feet wide, so that the moonlight shone clear down the sloping sides, and when the approaching figure drew a little nearer it resolved itself into Kennedy.

"Ah! you're here," he said. "I was afraid that you wouldn't show up."

"I was here before you were," said Ted. "It seems to me that you're about half an hour late."

"I'm time enough to trim you. Did you get frightened waiting here in the dark?"

Ted said nothing, and Kennedy threw a small hand satchel he carried, on the ground.

He was clad in a golf cap, light trousers and a big 'Varsity sweater, with a coat thrown over it.

He began to unbutton his coat.

"Young man," he said, "I'm going to give you the

worst beating to-night you ever received in your life. You insulted me last night. I couldn't do anything because we were in the presence of ladies. But I'm going to show you a thing or two now."

"Better hurry up and begin," said Ted, "I haven't much time to lose."

Kennedy threw his jacket and cap on the ground and drew his big sweater off over his head. He wore a tightly-fitting, dark jersey beneath it. It fitted so well that it showed off his figure to perfection—the great, deep arch of his chest, the heavy-knotted muscles of his long arms and the immense sweep of his bulky shoulders.

Ted noted all this as he threw his own coat and collar and tie on the grass. He was a good head shorter than his opponent, and nearly twenty pounds lighter. And in spite of Kennedy's dissipated-looking face, he was not fat or puffy. He was evidently one of those peculiarly constituted men who seem to retain their strength and speed and to remain in condition with little or no exercise. Many professional prize fighters are of this type, and can go into the ring with very little training. Experts have noted, however, that men of this kind rarely last very long, and that they generally come to an early grave.

"I've got a set of boxing gloves in here," said Kennedy. "I'll use them or not, if you say. I advise you to use them. You won't want too many cuts on your face, and I promise you that I am going to punish you."

"I'm not worrying much about the cuts on my face," said Ted. "But I have to use my hands every day, and if I get the knuckles split open or some of the bones broken it's likely to hamper me in my work. I'll take the gloves, if it's all the same to you."

"Oh! certainly, take them," said Kennedy, opening the bag and tossing a pair of them to Ted. He was more than a little surprised at the cool tone adopted by the young rough rider. He had expected him to be frightened as soon as he appeared, and still more so when he pulled off his sweater and exhibited his magnificent display of muscle. In fact, this was why he had taken his sweater off.

He smiled, however, as he pulled on the pair of gloves he had reserved for himself. They weighed a good deal more than the regulation four ounces, for there was a big brass knuckle carefully stowed away in the wadding of each and placed in such a manner as not to injure the hands of the man that used them.

"As you wanted to come alone," said Ted, rolling up his sleeves, "I came alone, and so we have no timekeeper. I judge that you intend this to be a finish fight, and that we're to keep on until one of us is unable to hold up his hands any longer."

"We'll keep on till you are knocked out," said Kennedy, savagely.

"This is the ring, then," said Ted. "It's level and it's a good deal more than twenty-four feet. It suits me all right."

"It's big enough to knock you about in," said Kennedy. "You'll be well acquainted with the feel of the ground here before——"

"Are you ready?" interrupted Ted.

Kennedy stopped talking and put up his fists. The two faced each other.

While these preparations had been going forward Ted had not noticed a dark figure which had been creeping along on the shady side of the trench.

It now stationed itself behind a bush near by and prepared to watch the fight that was about to begin.

Kennedy evidently was used to rushing matters in a fight.

For a moment he and Ted circled around each other, sparring lightly and feinting for an opening. Then Kennedy led savagely with his left. He had tried to feint Ted into leading and throwing himself open for a counter, but he had given that up as a bad job.

His savage lead whistled through the air a half inch away from Ted's chin. It was a swing, and Ted had judged it correctly, leaping back in time to avoid it.

He was too far back to counter, and at first he was determined to feel his man out rather than assume any aggressive part in the fight. Kennedy saw him dance away and went after him. He thought that Ted was afraid to stand up to him, and he found that the boy was wonderfully agile and light on his feet.

He feinted twice with his right and then let go with

the left again. A tremendous left swing was Joe Kennedy's best blow. The first time he had hit short. This time he stepped well forward, for he calculated that Ted would try to leap back again, and he planned for this leap.

But his plans were upset. Ted had sized up Kennedy as a swinger by this time, and he knew that his cue was to run straight in and jab him.

He stepped forward instead of back.

The fist that had swung for his head went behind it, and Kennedy's big elbow crooked around his neck.

Then his own right shot out for the wind, but was caught on Kennedy's forearm. His left, however, struck him full on the face and pushed his head back. Ted had ducked away from the clinch and danced off before his opponent had recovered from his surprise.

He had drawn first blood, for there was a faint, dark stain on the big man's mouth, and Kennedy had not as yet put a glove on him.

He stared at his opponent for a moment, dumb with rage.

Then he rushed wildly, swinging with both hands. Luckily for Ted, neither swing caught him, for he rushed inside the arms and smashed at his opponent's ribs with all his might. Kennedy staggered. This fierce body punishment was more than he had bargained for.

He dropped his hands and Ted's left stabbed him in the jaw and nearly knocked him down.

Kennedy swung wildly again, and Ted went to the grass.

Kennedy sprang forward with a cry of exultation, but Ted had bounced to his feet like a rubber ball. His head was ringing, and he felt a warm trickle of blood running into his ear.

Whatever it was that had hit him on the head was harder a good deal than an ordinary boxing glove. He had been struck with a brass knuckle before and he knew the feel of it. He saw that he was in a dangerous condition, indeed.

Kennedy was tremendously strong, and a hard hitter. One of his blows, from a fist armed with a brass knuckle, might fracture his skull or kill him. He determined to fight cautiously, for he must take no chances. Had others been present he would have demanded that Kennedy's gloves be examined, but he knew now that he was alone with a tough custome and that there was no use talking.

Kennedy, went after him again and again, but Ted's nimble feet stood him in good stead. Twice Kennedy grazed his head. Once he hit him on the chest, and the impact and hardness of the blow were so great as to leave a bruise on Ted for many days afterwards.

Then Ted planned a desperate rally, for he saw that it would be next to impossible to tire this great fellow out.

He dashed in, hitting with both hands when Kennedy least expected it.

One of his blows went home, full on the point of the jaw. The big fellow staggered back and his hands dropped.

Ted saw that his chance had come. He ran in to deliver a knockout, for he knew that he must do that to save himself from serious injury.

He swung himself now, with all his might, and Kennedy lurched forward in a heap on the ground.

Ted watched him fall and then something struck him on the back of the head.

A thousand flashes of light danced before his eyes. He felt himself falling.

He was unconscious, lying in the bottom of the deserted ditch with a great scalp wound on the back of his head.

The boy who had struck him had been watching the fight from behind the bush. The moonlight shone on his face and showed the features of Earl Rossiter.

"I did him up that time," he muttered, casting away an old gun barrel which he held in his hand.

"Now to bring Kennedy to himself again."

CHAPTER VII.

TED DISAPPEARS.

It generally turns out that when a man plots against another man he soon finds himself going deeper and deeper into a web of his own weaving, from which it

seems next to impossible to extricate himself. Earl Rossiter found that it was so in his case.

He turned hurriedly away from the unconscious form of Ted Strong. The black blood stain that was trickling down the white, still face made him shudder. Then he looked at Kennedy.

At first glance the ex-army officer seemed to be in little better plight than the boy he had been fighting with. He was lying on his side, with his arms and legs sprawled out in grotesque fashion, his lips swollen and out of shape from the blows he had received on the mouth and an ugly cut on his nose.

Ted Strong had realized that it was the time for desperate measures when he had delivered his knockout blow. He saw then, when it was too late, that Kennedy had not planned an ordinary affair of honor with him, but had plotted to do him up and had stowed brass knuckles, murderous weapons if skillfully used, in his boxing gloves for that purpose.

And so he had struck his final blow with every ounce of muscle and energy in his lithe body. It had been a blow that would have felled an ox. It was seldom indeed that Ted exerted his full strength, and when he did use it it was generally a big surprise to his opponent. Kennedy had dropped like a log. He had never known what hit him or where he was hit, he had been knocked out so suddenly and so completely.

"Wake up there, Joe, pull yourself together."

Earl Rossiter was bending over him, shaking him by the shoulders.

But Kennedy's head lurched to and fro with the shaking and he dropped again in a lifeless heap when the boy let go of his shoulders.

Earl was frightened.

Could they both be dead? He felt for the beating of Kennedy's heart with trembling hands. Yes, it was still beating. Earl heaved a great sigh of relief.

He seized Kennedy and shook him again. This time he was rewarded by hearing him groan, and a moment later Kennedy sat up and looked about him.

"Hello!" he gasped, through his thickened lips. "Who are you? What's the matter? Where am I?"

"It's me—Rossiter; you've just been having a fight with Ted Strong. You were knocked out."

"Knocked out!" It took several moments for this idea to penetrate Rossiter's dulled brain. He passed his hand over his face and drew it away stained with blood.

"My nose is broken," he muttered; "my lips are cut. They're all puffed up. Good heavens! what a sight I must be!"

"You do look a little under the weather," admitted Earl, "but can't you manage to get on your feet? We ought to get out of here and I don't want to call for help."

"And do you mean to say that the fellow knocked me out?" continued Kennedy.

"Yes, he knocked you out."

"I saw he was strong and clever the first punch he hit me," said Kennedy. "But I thought I had him sure. I can't believe it."

"You'd believe it, all right, if you saw your face in a looking-glass," said Rossiter.

"Shut up!" said Kennedy. "You are nothing but a fool kid. I remember now. That chap has gone back to his house and the game's up. Fenton, the man that was going to desert, will be caught by him as sure as shooting. He's a coward, and he'll surrender when he finds that Strong is in the house. Then, like as not, he'll give away the whole game, for, as I said, he's a coward. He'll peach on me. I'd better get out of this fort mighty quick, and so had you, for you're mixed up in it."

"Look here," said Earl, and he pointed to the prostrate figure of Ted Strong.

Kennedy stared at it. His under jaw dropped and he rubbed his head in bewilderment.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "He's knocked out, too, is he? I must have caught him a good one. I must have hit him with the brass knuckles."

"Brass knuckle nothing," said Earl, scornfully. "You never knocked him out. I did it. I hid behind that bush there and saw the fight. I saw that his infernal luck was still with him. I saw him knock you down, and I saw all our plans knocked in the head. I knew he would get back and prevent the robbery. I was mad with anger. I didn't know what I was doing, and there happened to be a rusty old gun barrel lying at my feet. I jumped out and hit him with it. I hit him behind. I didn't know how hard I hit him, but he went down. Look at him. I'm sorry for it now."

"You're a fool!" said Kennedy. "If the fellow's your enemy that was a mighty lucky stroke of yours. Take a drink."

He got a silver flask out from his hand satchel and took a good pull at it. Then he handed it to Earl, who managed to get some of the fiery stuff down his throat.

Kennedy leaned forward and looked closer at Ted Strong.

"Holy smoke!" he muttered. "You did hit him hard. You must have fractured his skull!"

He leaned over further and passed his hands around the back of Ted's head. Then he picked up the gun barrel which lay near by on the grass and looked at it.

"That makes a pretty good weapon!" he said. "You've come mighty near killing the fellow. But we've got to get out of here. He may come to and he may not. If he doesn't he'll never be looked for in this old ditch. If he does come to he won't remember much. He'll just think that I licked him in this fight and left him there. I won't have any trouble persuading him that that's what happened. A man has a hard time remembering when he has just been knocked out. I'll tell him that I was knocked sort of silly and went home, not knowing that he had been knocked out, too. I'll leave the gloves on his hands. I don't think he'll bother us much more."

"We can't leave him here," said Earl.

He had recovered from his fear and nervousness, and now he was much the cooler of the two.

"He's sure to be found here some time, and it may be traced back to us. Let's carry him back to his house and leave him there. We can say that you knocked him out and that I happened along, and that you called me down and asked me to help you home with him."

"We may be able to get him into the house without anybody seeing us," said Kennedy. "I guess my head is kind of muddled yet. The rough riders were all to be away at a kind of a party to-night."

"Yes, and your friend, Fenton, was to get away with the money."

"Yes, that's so. He's made good by this time, I guess. The house will be deserted. We'll take him back to it."

Kennedy seized his sweater and pulled it on. He put on his jacket also and spent some little time wiping the wounds on his face with a handkerchief. Then he stowed the boxing gloves and flask away in the satchel first, extracting the brass knuckles from the gloves. He slipped them into the pocket of his trousers, but found that there was a hole in them. Then he carelessly tossed them into the long grass at the side of the trench.

"Nobody will ever find them there," he said. "I guess I'll leave the satched there, too. I'll want both my hands carrying this fellow. We'll have to take him along the trench to the end. We'll be sure of keeping out of sight that way. His house is just at the end of it outside the palisade. It's lucky it's not far away. Take hold."

He bent over and lifted Ted by the shoulders. Earl shuddered as he seized his feet, but the work had to be done, and he steeled his nerves for the effort. They found the form of the unconscious rough rider a pretty good weight for the two of them, but they stumbled along with it, panting and making the best time they could. They were anxious to get this unwelcome work over with as soon as possible.

As they neared the end of the trench they could see plainly the house in which Ted and the other rough riders had been quartered during their stay in the fort. Earl glanced up at it. Then he dropped Ted's feet on the ground and came to a standstill.

"Look at that," he cried. "There's some one there. Listen."

There was a light burning in an upper window of the house which they had expected to find dark and deserted. They heard the sounds of voices in the house. Then a light appeared in another window and in another. It looked as if whoever was in the house was going around from room to room lighting it up.

Joe Kennedy stopped and stared also. Then he laid Ted on the ground and looked again.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "What has happened?"

"That deserter of yours, Fenton, must be crazy," said Earl. "Is that the way he robs a house? He's going around lighting it up, so that people can see him in the windows while he's at work. Look at that, will you?"

The lower windows in the house had now kindled yellow as the gas in the room inside was lit. From top to bottom the house was a blaze of lights. It looked as if a party had been held there that evening, and that the place had been illuminated for the occasion.

"I can't understand it," said Kennedy. "This will never do. That can't be Fenton doing that. Besides, he must have got in and away some time ago."

"Lie low there," said Earl. "There's some one coming out."

The door banged and two or three figures appeared on the porch of the illuminated house.

"They are coming in this direction," muttered Kennedy. "This man we have is as good as dead. I've just been listening for his heart. It's scarcely beating.

There's an empty hole down here that a gun used to be mounted in. I'll push him down there and cover him up with dead brush. He'll never be discovered. You must help me and quick."

"I can't," said Earl, "look out! Here they come."

He and Kennedy dropped on their faces in the long grass beside the unconscious form of Ted Strong. The persons who had come from the house were walking along from the place beside the trench. From where they were, it was impossible to see the side of the trench where Earl Rossiter and Joe Kennedy were lying, although it was within earshot. They were talking excitedly as they walked along, and the two hiding in the trench listened eagerly to catch their words.

"Wobbed, I tell you!" one of them said. "The woom was bwoken into and the money in the satchel gone when I got there."

"That's that cursed fool, Jack Slate," muttered Earl. "He must have come home from that party early and then called the others to give an alarm."

"I guess Fenton has got away with the money, all right," said Kennedy.

"I wonder where Ted Strong is?" said the other boy, who was walking along the top of the trench with Jack Slate. "I've been looking about everywhere for him."

Then the two figures hurried off out of hearing.

Kennedy looked about him cautiously and then sprang to his feet again.

"Look here," he said. "You must help me throw this fellow down that hole. He's dead now or he's sure to die."

"I've done enough," said Earl.

"If he's found it'll be murder, and you're the man who murdered him. You hit the blow. If he disappears everybody will think that he ran off with the money which he should have divided among his followers and paid his men with."

Earl leaped to his feet and began to assist Kennedy in handling the unconscious form.

"He disappears," he said.

The boy knew now that he had gone too far to draw back, and that he must see the terrible business through to the end.

He and Kennedy lifted Ted between them, carried him to the hole half filled with rubbish. When they left the place there was nothing to show that anything had been hidden there.

Ted Strong had disappeared, indeed.

CHAPTER VIII.

SERIOUS CHARGES.

The surprise that had been given to Joe Kennedy and Earl Rossiter was caused by the fact that the party which the young rough riders had attended that evening had broken up at an unusually early hour.

Ted was not present, of course, as he had his business at the quartermaster's to transact, and the other business of the fight, of which he had said nothing beyond dropping a hint of it to Kit Summers.

By a strange coincidence Louise was not at the party either, nor was Kate. Kit found things rather dull in consequence, and left earlier than the others. He went straight to Ted's room. He found that the door had been forced open and that the satchel which he knew contained the money paid for the steers, missing, while the room itself was in the greatest disorder.

A window which had been forced open on the ground floor told the story of how the thief had managed to get into the house.

Kit lost no time in giving the alarm, and a thorough search had been made of the house just when Earl Rossiter and Joe Kennedy noticed the display of lights in it.

There was little sleep for any of the young rough riders that night.

The next question that arose after it was definitely settled that the money had been taken by some thief was, "Where was Ted Strong, who had charge of the money?"

Col. Martin had called all the boys together into his room to ask them about the matter. When the quartermaster appeared he said that Ted had left his office a little after eight, saying that he wanted to get away quickly.

Everybody stared at the quartermaster.

There were several officers in the room, and Earl Rossiter had just made his appearance. He looked a little pale and disheveled, and said that he had been awakened out of his bed by the noise and rumpus, and had hurriedly dressed himself and come out to see what the matter was.

"What is it that has happened?" he said. "Have the Indians attacked the fort?"

Bud Morgan glared at him.

"Look here, ye young maverick," he said, "we're talkin' business here, and mighty serious business. Ye have no right ter come cuttin' in that way."

"And you have no right to address me in that fashion," said Earl, haughtily.

"Mr. Rossiter," interrupted Col. Martin, "we have no time at present for discussions of that nature. I am consulting here with some of my officers and with these young men in regard to a robbery which has just been discovered. It seems that the house occupied by these young men has been broken into, and that the money paid over to them for their herd of cattle has been stolen."

"You don't say so," said Earl, manifesting the liveliest dismay and surprise. "How could such a thing have happened? Who is the thief?"

"That all remains for us to discover," said the colonel. "We were just starting an investigation when you entered. I have doubled all the sentries and started off a sergeant with an extra guard to search the whole place thoroughly."

"I noticed them march past when I came out," said Earl.

"I have also ordered the assembly to be called and the roll of all the companies taken, to see, if possible, if any of the enlisted men are missing. We must sift this matter to the bottom."

As if in confirmation of the colonel's words, the ringing bugles spoke out at that moment in the stirring assembly call, and the sounds of hurrying feet were heard on the parade ground outside.

Several of the boys looked out at the windows and saw the men forming in the moonlight.

"If there's anyone missing we'll soon discover it in this way." said Col. Martin.

"Where's Ted Strong himself?" asked Earl.

"That's just what we don't know," said Lieut. Ransom. "He left the quartermaster's house at a little after eight."

"And hasn't been seen since," said Capt. Lester. "The fort is being searched for him."

"That looks funny," said Earl. "Ted was in charge of the money, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said the quartermaster, "and he naturally would have come directly home after leaving me. It wouldn't have taken him ten minutes to get to the house."

"We left at about a quarter after eight," said Thaddeus Perkins. "The house couldn't have been left unwatched for more than a few moments according to that schedule."

"He might have come home here and fought with the robber," said Earl. "Was there any sign of a struggle?"

"No, there wasn't any signs of a struggle," said Bud Morgan, crossly, "an', what's more, it's none of yer doggoned business whether there was or not."

Earl Rossiter paid no attention to this remark.

"Ted might have come home and found the money gone," he went on. "Then he might have gone in chase of the fellow himself."

"Not very likely," said Capt. Lester, dryly. "He could have given the alarm so easily in such a place as an army post. He would never have run off that way."

"I hope that nothing has happened to him," said Rossiter, feigning the keenest anxiety. "I hope nothing has happened to him. I wonder where he can be."

Kit Summers had been saying nothing during this talk, but he had been watching Earl narrowly. It came to his mind that the fellow knew more about Ted's disappearance than he cared to admit. But it was only an instinctive suspicion with nothing on which to base it, so Kit remained silent and watched Earl.

"It's very funny," said the quartermaster. "It looks queer to have Ted and the money disappear at the same time. Did he owe much money back at the ranch?"

"He owed the boys their back pay," said Bud Morgan, "but that don't cut no figure. We'd trust him fer twenty years."

"Was the ranch a paying proposition?" The quartermaster prided himself on being a very keen business man, who could be taken in by nobody.

"It wasn't paying," said Earl. "I happen to know that. But you must not suspect Ted. I would hate to think Ted had disappeared with the money—I mean had run off with the money to steal it. I know he wouldn't do such a thing."

"Since when did you become such a keen friend to Ted Strong?" asked Bud Morgan.

"Did he say anything to you about his business at the ranch?" inquired the quartermaster.

"He said last night, when I talked to him for a while, that things looked rather bad in a business way. He had the ranch and some cows, but didn't have any capital," said Earl.

"Oh, he did, did he?" said the quartermaster, with a satisfied look.

"I don't believe that Ted would do such a thing," said Earl. "I know that there was a big temptation for him, and that he might have broken open the door and pretended that the place was robbed and then ran

away with the money himself. But I don't beileve it of Ted."

Kit Summers sprang to his feet.

"I believe that you are trying to throw suspicion on Ted in an underhand way. I don't believe those charges of yours for a minute," he cried.

"Where is he then?" asked the quartermaster.

At this minute a sergeant entered and saluted.

"I beg leave to report that Mr. Strong cannot be found," he said.

Rossiter and the quartermaster looked triumphantly at Kit.

"I'll find him," said Kit. "I'll show you, Earl Rossiter, that you can't make charges like that with impunity."

Then he dashed from the room.

CHAPTER IX.

KIT GOES ON THE TRAIL.

As Kit ran out of the room he was in a furious rage. He saw that Earl Rossiter was doing his very best to poison the minds of the officers at the fort against Ted Strong, all the while pretending to act the part of his friend. Some time ago, when he had less control over his temper, he would have broken forth at Earl Rossiter. But Ted Strong had taught him control among other things, and he had learned the lesson well.

As he walked over to his own quarters across the parade ground he paid little attention to the men about him, who had been called forth from their bunks by the sounds of the bugle. He was thinking hard of what Ted had said to him.

Ted Strong had mentioned the fact to him that he had a little private business to attend to after he saw the quartermaster, and that that was part of his reason for not going to the party he had attended. He had not told him what the nature of his business was, and Kit had not pressed him for an answer, although he was curious in regard to it.

"There's no use trying to do anything till daylight," he finally concluded. "I'll go home and try to sleep."

But he did not have much success trying to sleep. The other boys came in after a while, and it was some time before they had quieted down. For an hour after that Kit lay tossing about on the iron bedstead supplied by the United States Government. Then he leaped to his feet.

"I remember now what it was that I have been trying to think of," he said. "Ted said that he was going home by way of that old ditch. That's what it was. He must have gone along there after he left the quartermaster."

Kit was pulling on his clothes by this time, and a few moments later he had noiselessly left the house.

It was pitchy dark outside now, as the moon was set, but he pushed on to the outside of the wall of the fort. He was challenged twice by a sentinel, for double guards had been placed all around the fort and the watch kept that night was unusually sharp. On each occasion he made himself known and was allowed to pass without further inquiry.

Then he made his way outside and along the old trench. Here and there, dimly outlined against the sky, he could see the forms of sentinels stationed along the top of the trench commanding egress or ingress to it in all directions.

It was only on rare occasions that sentries were posted here.

As a rule the trench was unguarded, but that night, when the alarm that the robbery had occurred went out, the officer of the day had placed men at every possible coign of vantage. It was too dark, then, to search the trench, but he saw that a man might lie in hiding in it, and he placed his men so that it would be impossible for anyone to get out of it or into it without being seen.

Kit was challenged again when he entered it, but as he came nearer the soldier on duty recognized him. He knew Kit well, and allowed him to pass with a pleasant nod.

Then the boy started to walk along the trench in the direction which he imagined Ted Strong had taken earlier in the evening or rather the night before, for it was now wearing towards morning.

As he went along he drew further and further away from the sentinels who were posted at the ends of the trench. Nearly at the middle of it his foot struck something.

He stooped and picked it up. And then his heart almost stopped beating, for he thought that he had found the satchel containing the money.

When he examined it, however, he saw that it was not the satchel he was looking for. It was a satchel, however, and there was something in it.

Kit opened it and found the boxing gloves and whisky flask inside.

He dropped on his knees and began to scrutinize the grass about him.

It was trampled down in a big ring.

"There's been a fight here," muttered kit. "There are the gloves and here is the place where they fought."

He ran his fingers about in the untrodden grass, and they struck something hard and jingling. Then he groped again and brought his hand away with a big brass knuckle in it.

"Foul play of some kind," he muttered, in a low voice. He did not dare even to think of what might have happened to Ted Strong. There was a big mystery before him yet.

He rose to his feet again and walked further.

A little way along the path a man was crouching in the shadow.

He had been crouching there for hours watching on all sides but seeing sentinels in the distance in all directions. He was trembling with fear, and clasped close to his bosom he held a satchel. It was the satchel containing the stolen money, and the man clutching it was Fenton, the deserter. He had scarcely left the house when Kit had entered it and given the alarm. Then, like the coward he was, he had made a dash for the nearest place of safety—the trench. He had reached it at one point just as Earl and Kennedy had left it by another.

And he had run himself into a trap when he might have escaped by making a bold race for freedom. When he got to the other end of the trench, hoping to make his way out there, he found that sentries had already been posted at that place by the vigilant officer of the day. He knew that he was caught and so he had cowered in the shadow of the trench, pale with fright, and hugging the stolen money to his bosom.

Now he heard Kit approaching him. He might have remained in the shadow and allowed the boy to pass him, but he was too much of a coward to do that. He was panic-stricken, and he moved away as softly as he could.

But not softly enough to escape the keen ears of Kit Summers.

Kit heard the rustling sound, looked up and so saw a dim figure moving away from him.

"Ted," he cried, softly, "is that you?"

There was no answer. The figure only moved away the quicker.

Kit had been thinking of Ted, and for a moment had imagined that the figure before him might have been that of the young rough rider. What Ted could be doing there he could not imagine, and when no reply was given to his question he concluded that it must be some one else. And who was it? Whoever it was he had no business there.

Kit started forward in pursuit. He could still see the flying man dashing along the french, and he followed at his best speed. He was gaining, too, for, although fear had lent wings to Fenton, he was not nearly so good a runner as Kit Summers.

He gained more and more and came almost within reach of Fenton. He saw that the man wore a uniform now, and that he carried a satchel. Then he made a wild dive for him, but Fenton leaped to one side and turned back a little way.

Kit wheeled as quickly as he could. They were in the middle of the trench now and out of the hearing of the sentries which had been posted at each end of it. Kit was gaining on the fugitive. He was almost within his grasp when he disappeared.

It seemed as though the ground had swallowed him up. He had vanished completely from his sight, and Kit had accustomed himself to the darkness by this time so that he could see objects about him fairly well.

He tried to check his speed and look where the man he had been chasing had gone to.

But he was too late. The next instant he felt his feet slipping from under him. Then came a crashing fall. He had tumbled through a mass of overgrown weeds and underbrush into some dark hole and he landed in a heap at the bottom. The breath was knocked from his body, and he lay panting for a moment.

Then he tried to stand up, but at that instant a pair of hands seized his throat from behind and bore him down again.

Kit struggled and struggled but felt that he was being choked, that the breath was leaving his body, that he would soon lose consciousness.

CHAPTER X.

A FIGHT IN THE DARK—CONCLUSION.

The hole in which Kit Summers now found himself was about ten feet deep on the side in which he had tumbled in. The top of the hole, where it opened into

the wall of the trench, was completely overgrown with weeds and grass so that, inside, it was as dark as pitch.

The man who had tumbled into the trench before Kit—the man whom he had been pursuing—had him by the throat now and was fighting him with the despairing energy which a coward will summon to his aid when forced to the last ditch. Kit had no time to cry out or shout. The attack from behind had come upon him too quick, and even had he used his voice it is doubtful if he could have made the nearest sentry hear him.

He pushed and struggled and tried to throw the man off his back, but Fenton was half crazy with fear and fighting like a madman. He shoved Kit's head down against the ground and clambered on his back.

The wind was knocked out of Kit again. He felt the knees of Fenton pushing hard against the small of his back and Fenton's wiry fingers gripping hard at his throat. He collected his energies and made a great effort.

He managed to throw the deserter partly off his balance. Then he was up on his knees, and the two were struggling hand to hand.

The fight was a more even thing now. Kit could not see the man he was wrestling with, for it was so dark that he could not have seen his hand before his face. He could feel his breath against his cheek, however, and feel the grip of his hands on his shoulder and throat.

He broke loose and drew back his fist. Then he struck with all his force. He landed, too—somewhere on the fellow's face, and he felt the fingers that were clawing at his throat loosen their hold a little.

He struck again. This time he hit even harder than before. His blow landed somewhere on the man's chest. Then Fenton broke away from him. He heard him clamber to his feet. Kit struggled to his feet also and reached for him.

But his hands met nothing but empty air. He listened and heard the sound of hurried footsteps. They seemed to be moving away from him.

He started after them, following the direction of the sound as well as he could. The hole seemed to be an unusually large one, for he walked several paces without encountering anything. Then he stumbled and fell. When he reached out his hand he felt that he had stumbled over the body of a man who had been lying almost under his feet. At first, he thought that it was the man he had been fighting with, and he laid hands on him to hold him fast.

But there was no need to do that, as he soon found. This man, whoever he was, was either dead or unconscious.

Kit drew back, trembling and excited after his recent struggle.

Then he fumbled in his pocket, and, at last, to his great delight, discovered a match box. With shaking hands he struck one of the matches, and by its flickering light looked about him. He was at the bottom of a deep hole, grass grown on the sides. He guessed rightly that this was formerly used as a station for a hidden battery. There was a dim passageway leading off in one direction. It had formerly led to the magazines where ammunition for the guns mounted here was stored.

Then Kit turned his gaze upon the face of the man before him. He looked at it.

Then the match fell from his fingers to the ground and went out, and Kit, himself, giving a great gasp of horror, nearly tumbled over on his face.

For the man, lying apparently dead before him, with his blood-stained face showing ghastly in the flickering light from the match, was the young captain of the rough riders. Kit's best and dearest friend, Ted Strong!

* * * * * * *

"Tell me, do you think there is a chance?" the question was asked by Kit Summers. He stood in one of the little bedrooms of the fort. In one corner of the room, stretched out on the little white bed, was Ted Strong. Two doctors, one in the uniform of an army surgeon and one in civilian attire, were bending over him, arranging the bandages about his head.

In one corner of the room sat Col. Martin, and on a chair nearby was the missing satchel—the satchel containing the money which had been paid for the herd of cattle sold to the government by Ted Strong.

It had been found by the sentries whom Kit called to his aid in the abandoned gun pit.

A thorough search of the pit and old passages had been made by one detachment of soldiers, while another squad was conveying the body of Ted Strong to the hospital. It was known by this time that Fenton had deserted, and a thorough search for him had been made, for from Kit's description, it was clear that he was the man who had been seen skulking in the trench.

No signs of him were discovered until a search was made of the passage leading to the abandoned magazine. It was found, then, that the passage connected with another forgotten passage which led to the outer air a considerable distance in advance of the point where the outermost line of sentries had been posted.

It was evident that Fenton had made his escape through this, but coward to the last, he had dropped the satchel he had stolen in his flight, and it was found with the money inside it, intact, in the old magazine passage.

In the meantime Kit Summers and the other young rough riders were thinking a great deal more about the life of their young leader than the money that had been lost.

He had been as cold and still as death itself when he was carried to the hospital, and the regular army surgeon said that he was suffering from concussion of the brain, and that there was little hope of saving his life.

But there was another doctor from the East visiting at the fort, Dr. Fortescue by name, a specialist of world-wide reputation. At present he was examining the unconscious boy.

Kit Summers had forced himself into the room. His anxiety about Ted was so great that he could not bear to wait outside with the others.

Dr. Fortescue turned towards him and beckoned him softly to come nearer the bed.

"I have just injected a dose of strychnia hypodermically," said the doctor. "He responds to the stimulation. His life is saved."

And Kit saw by the first rays of the rising sun, which were now streaming in through the uncurtained window, that Ted was, indeed, alive and breathing; that his chest was heaving faintly and that a faint flush could now be discerned on the face which had before looked so waxy and deathlike.

He fell on his knees by the bedside, holding to the coverlet with his hands.

"Thank God!" was all he said.

The next day Ted was able to sit up in bed and talk to his friends. His strong constitution had rallied rapidly once it had recovered from the shock, and it was only a matter of a few days now until he was as well as ever again.

Col. Martin and the other officers of the fort questioned him about his adventures in the trench, but Ted told them but little.

"I had a little boxing match there with a gentleman at the fort," he said. "After it was over I must have felt dizzy or something. I can't remember much more."

"And will you not give the gentleman's name?"

Ted shook his head and smiled.

"Really I would rather not," he said. "It was simply a little affair between ourselves."

Col. Martin stared at him for some time in silence.

"I must say," he muttered, at length, "that you hold to the strictest code of honor. Here's some fellow came very near murdering you and yet you refuse to tell his name."

"Yes, I'm afraid I'll have to."

"It's your duty to tell. We have to investigate this matter."

"Col. Martin," said Ted, "will you answer me two questions?"

"Certainly," said the colonel. "Ask me anything you want."

"Are you a West Point man?"

"Yes."

"Well, when you were at West Point, if you had fought with another man and had been injured seri-

ously, would you have told the name of the man to the authorities?"

"Certainly not," said Col. Martin, with emphasis.

"Then don't ask me to do it."

The colonel saw the trap he had walked into, and at first looked as though he were angry. Then he laughed.

"You're a plucky youngster. If I had officers like you in my regiment I wouldn't be afraid of anything, no matter what the odds. I don't wonder now, that the volunteers fought so well in the Philippines."

Then he arose and withdrew from the room. Kit and Ted were left alone.

"Ted," said Kit, "I'm morally certain that Earl Rossiter had something to do with this. I know you had a fight with some fellow. I know that he used brass knuckles, and I think that it was Earl's friend, that fellow Kennedy, for he left the fort this morning along with Earl Rossiter. He had his face banged up a bit."

"That's all true," said Ted. "I must admit that you are quite a detective."

"Well, I think that there was some plan cooked up to lay you out. I know that Earl Rossiter tried to arouse suspicions that you had run off with that money. If I had not found you there, you would have died, and it would have been deliberate murder. And yet you don't mean to make any charges? You mean to let these enemies go free?"

"I do."

"But why, Ted? Are you crazy?"

Ted shook his head and smiled again.

"I have more than one reason. I told Col. Martin one of them. I'll tell you another, and I'll tell it in the same way—by asking a question."

"Go ahead and ask."

"If you were in my place and Earl Rossiter were Kate Lamont's cousin, would you speak? Tell the truth, now."

Kit hung his head.

"I don't know, Ted," he said. "I guess maybe I wouldn't."

At that moment the door opened and Louise Rossiter entered. She carried in her hands a great vase of flowers.

"Here's this man they suspected of running off with the money," said Kit. "You never suspected him, did you?"

Louise set the vase on the table before she answered. Then she sat down near the bed and looked at Ted. She slowly shook her head.

"No matter what the proofs were," she said, "nobody could ever make me believe that Ted Strong would ever do anything dishonorable."

And so Kit left them together.

THE END.

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